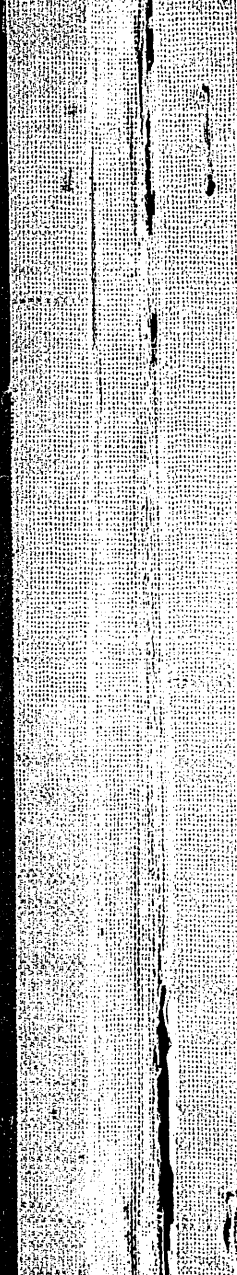


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THE  
WHAT IS THE  
CHURCH?

By the

Right Rev. C. F. D'Arcy, D.D.

Bishop of Down

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TO THE EDITORS: NOTE

THE object of this series is to throw light upon problems felt for some time past in the mission field, and lately brought to public notice by the Kikuyu Conference. For the missionaries and the young Native Churches, face to face with the great forces of heathenism and Islam, questions of co-operation of necessity arise as practical politics demanding careful consideration and wise handling. The writers do not attempt to discuss the immediate points at issue, but rather aim at giving help towards clear thinking on the larger questions which lie behind. Each author is entirely responsible for his own pamphlet and for that alone.

## WHAT IS THE CHURCH ?

THE Church is the Christian Society. It is the company of men and women who hold the Christian Faith, who set before themselves the rule of Christ as the law of their life, and who unite in the worship and service of God in Christ.

When we examine our Lord's teaching to find some definition of the Church we are disappointed. We find, indeed, central in His teaching, the idea of the Kingdom—the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. But the balance of scholarly opinion is decisive that this idea cannot be interpreted in a strictly ecclesiastical sense.

Yet our Lord's teaching and action clearly involved the creation and propagation of a society. This society was founded on the principle of discipleship. Those who attached themselves to the person of our Lord formed a company animated by one spirit, obeying one rule, looking forward to one hope. The selection and appointment of the twelve Apostles show that our Lord intended this company to be more than a mere gathering. He desired to secure permanence, order, ministerial vocation.

Many passages prove that He taught His disciples that in them was to be fulfilled all that the old Israel, related by covenant to God, had signified, and that their accomplishment of this purpose was dependent

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## 2 What is the Church?

upon their relation to Himself. Very remarkable in this connection is the saying, "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in Heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them." Here the full efficacy, the spiritual force, of the whole community is declared to be concentrated in the smallest gathering of its members, because of the presence of the Master Himself.

After Pentecost we find the Church entering upon its world-wide mission, preaching Christ, making converts, admitting them by the rite of baptism, as the Lord appointed, providing a ministry of elders and deacons, remembering their Lord and His redeeming Love in the holy feast He had commanded.

It is clear from the Acts and the Epistles of St. Paul that the unity of all baptized Christian people in one great fellowship was recognised as an important part of the Christian life. We read of the very earliest converts that "they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and the prayers." Here is a simple enumeration of the elements of the life of the Church: creed, fellowship, sacrament, worship.

We note also that great pains were taken by the Apostles and the other leaders to prevent division. The controversy which followed the admission of the Gentiles created many searchings of heart; yet it was settled so well and so rapidly that when, in the third century, the light of history enables us to see clearly, we find the Church unbroken. The spirit of unity had solved one of the most critical questions that ever agitated the mind of Christianity, and solved it by comprehension.



At the same epoch we find, fully established, the threefold ministry of Bishops, Presbyters, and Deacons. And here let it be noted that modern critical scholarship, while showing that an order of Bishops, as distinct from the Presbyters, was not universal in the first Christian period, yet sufficiently justifies the assertion of our Ordinal that "from the Apostles' time there have been these orders of Ministers in Christ's Church : Bishops, Priests, and Deacons."

The institution, then, of a Church, settled, ordered, and continuous, is clearly in accordance with the mind of Christ and the teaching and practice of the Apostles, and was the necessary outcome of the way in which the Gospel was presented to the world. It is also clear that if the ideal of Christianity were fully realised, all congregations of Christian people in the world would form together a world-wide fellowship or communion, holding the same fundamental Faith, striving to realise in their lives the rule of Christ, and bound together by the sacraments which Christ ordained. Such a Church would be, in the fullest sense, Catholic.

This would surely be the only adequate fulfilment of the prayer, "That they all may be one as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee."

Yet to-day we find Christian people, who hold the great essentials of the Faith and are truly aiming at the same great end, divided into separate camps, and often competing with one another in ways which border on antagonism, and cause an immense waste of power.

It was, in the past, seriously maintained by some students of this question that these divisions, instead of weakening the cause of Christ, are really a source of strength, as showing the varied forms of life which Christianity can assume and its adaptability to the

## What is the Church ?

needs of all sorts of people. But this view is no longer being put forward. The evidence against it from the mission-field is overwhelming. All the world over it is being demonstrated that the divisions of Christianity are proving a source of fatal weakness. We, who have behind us the history of how the present state of things came into being, may with equanimity be able to hold on our own way and let others go theirs in separation from us. But those whose antecedents are wholly different from ours are puzzled and often repelled. The mission-field is holding up a mirror to the Church, and the picture of ourselves that we see there is one that proves how far we have gone from the ideal of our great Master.

When we examine the history of the divisions of Christendom we must discern that no great Church or community of Christian people is altogether free from blame in this matter. We must also, however, conclude, with equal certainty, that every one of these great divisions stands for some principle of real and permanent value. Can the Church of England hold that she is not in any way responsible for the separation from her of the Methodist body? Surely it was because the spiritual life of the Church lacked some element of importance that she was unable to retain that great company of earnest souls. No one will now venture to deny this assertion. And what was true in this case was, in some way or degree, true in every such case.

Suppose some visitor from another planet were to come to this world and to endeavour to gather a full conception of what constitutes Christianity. Could he take the Eastern Church, or the Church of Rome, or the Church of England, or the Presbyterian Church, or the Methodist Church, and say of it, in its isolation,

“There is Christianity in its organised form—There is the Christian Church”? It is perfectly clear that he could not. To get the full meaning and value of Christianity in the world, he would have to take all these bodies, and many more as well, and consider them in relation to one another and in relation to their origin and history.

So surely, for Christian bodies which share the fruits of the Reformation, it is true that, within the limits thus set, the effective value of Christianity in the world cannot be estimated by reference to the Church of England alone apart from the other great reformed communions. Consider, for example, the vast work for Christ and for man which has been accomplished by Presbyterian, Congregational, and Methodist Missionary agencies in India, China, Japan, Africa. Or take, as cases in point, the work done in Corea and Manchuria. Are we to suppose that all this has been done outside the bounds of the Church as Christ Himself regards it?

To answer such questions as these, it is useless to appeal to scholastic definitions of the Church and work out your result by logical processes. Abstract measures can never take full account of concrete life. Where real life is, it overflows all mechanisms and breaks down all syllogisms. It is because we have tried to confine the life of Christ within the limits of our own narrow ecclesiastical logic that we have failed to comprehend how splendid is the demonstration of the reality and fullness of that life which has been given to the world in modern times.

Two things we need especially to be reminded of :

First, the essence of discipleship is relation to Christ Himself. No human soul that loves Him can be really outside the Church.

Secondly, we have forgotten too often and too much the value and the power of charismatic ministries. In St. Paul's epistles there is ample evidence that special gifts, which were traced to the Divine Spirit, were recognised as divinely appointed ministries in the Church and yet were evidently distinct from the regularly appointed orders of Presbyters and Deacons. Such were the ministries of prophets, healers, interpreters of tongues, and so on. These ministries, in apostolic times, assumed the forms which corresponded with the needs and circumstances of the age. St. Paul found it necessary to use his authority to regulate the exercise of some of these ministries ; nevertheless he recognised their place in the ordered life of the Church.

In modern times we have forgotten this principle. We have not considered that the Divine call comes to human souls in ways which may seem to us strange and outside the rules of the system to which we belong. No doubt the possessors of such gifts are often wayward and sometimes self-willed. It is the defect natural to the quality of such ministries. It may be sometimes impossible to retain them within the ordered life of the Church. But it does not follow that they have no message from God and no lesson to impart which the Church has need to learn.

The multitude of competing Communion which are now characteristic of Protestant Christianity are, we should recognise, for the most part, the outcome of charismatic ministries, every one of which had some message of real importance for the Church and the world. And dare we deny that the ordered ministries which have sprung from such beginnings are genuine Christian ministries working in accordance with the will and under the manifest blessing of our Lord ?

Their glorious fruitfulness can have no other explanation.

That these ministries have come into competition, and often antagonism, with the order of the Church from which they originally separated is surely not altogether their own fault. Can we doubt that if the Spirit of Christ had prevailed more fully in the older order it would have drawn them in with the cords of love ?

The greatest need of the Church of Christ in the world to-day is to realise that she cannot enter into full possession of that spiritual heritage which is for her in Christ until she attains an organic life which is large enough to include all the great elements of Christian vitality which are active and effective for the salvation of man in our complex modern social order.

We have still to learn the value of the principle of interpenetration. It is the principle which, both in the organic world and in the world of consciousness, yields all real wealth and power of life. By it must come the solution of the great problem of Church Unity. It is absurd to suppose that the Church of England can simply absorb the great Nonconformist bodies. May it not be that, things being as they are, it would be no sign of health or life if she could ?

But the Church of England may some day, if we pray and work and love aright, be able to enter along with these great bodies into a higher and fuller, and therefore more truly organic life than is hers to-day. Already in our theological and devotional literature, in our critical studies, and in our hymnody, we have attained unity by means of interpenetration. The Christian student and the Christian worshipper share in a larger heritage than that which belongs to the

Church of their birth. May it not be that we see the beginning of a unification which will gather into one all the elements of good which exist in the world? Such a unification must draw together into some system of interpenetration all that is characteristic of every great Christian organisation, so that none loses what is essential in the principles for which it stands. There is nothing impossible in such a unity.

What, then, is the Church? It is "the blessed company of all faithful people." It is the whole multitude of those who love Christ. In that great whole Christ is manifested in all the ministries of love, in the salvation and uplifting of humanity. And if the unity which is in Christ has not yet been realised, it is because we have not as yet grasped the truth that all our partial views and discordant systems may, if we will, be brought into harmony in the fullness of His greater life.



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